



Veteran News

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Marion VA to Receive Additional \$6.5 Million

As a result of a Congressional hearing in Marion in June, and continued Congressional oversight, the Department of Veterans Affairs has approved a \$5.1 million supplemental funding request for the Northern Indiana Health Care System (NIHCS), which will be used to satisfy this year's immediate budget shortfalls. A \$1.4 million grant has also been authorized to recruit new employees to fill critical vacancies within the Northern Indiana Health Care System, which includes the Marion VA Medical Center.

GI BILL EDUCATION BENEFITS

On May 23, 2000, the House kept its promise to improve and upgrade Montgomery GI Bill benefits in the wake of rising education costs by passing H.R. 4268. If signed into law, the Veterans and Dependents Millennium Education Act, would increase the current Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) benefit from \$536 to \$600 a month on October 1, 2000, for full-time students, and to \$720 on October 1, 2002. In addition, there would be proportionate increases for part-time students.

The original GI Bill of 1944 is widely regarded as one of the most important pieces of social legislation ever passed by Congress. Like the original bill and its later versions, this bill makes higher education and training more affordable to military personnel returning to civilian life. The bill would immediately help hundreds of thousands of veterans, service members, and their families who take advantage of the Montgomery GI Bill. While more remains to be done, this legislation is an important first step toward a meaningful increase. H.R. 4268 would also:

- Provide another opportunity to convert from the Veterans' Education Assistance Program (VEAP) to the MGIB. Many active duty individuals either declined the last chance to convert or had zeroed out their VEAP accounts.
- Increase survivors' and dependents' educational assistance benefits for full-time students from \$485 to \$600 a month starting October 1, 2000, and to \$720 a month on October 1, 2002, with proportionate increases for part-time students. The bill also authorizes an annual cost of living adjustment (COLA).
- Permit the award of Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance payments to be retroactive to the date of the service-connected death or award of 100 percent disability rating.
- Allow monthly educational assistance benefits to be paid between term, quarter, or semester intervals of up to eight weeks.
- Allow use of MGIB benefits to pay the fee for a veteran's civilian occupational licensing or certification examination.

The measure, which is a priority of the Committee, has been referred to the Senate for its consideration.

FISCAL YEAR 2001 VA BUDGET

On June 21, 2000, the House passed H.R. 4635, the VA, HUD and Independent Agencies appropriations bill, by a vote of 256 to 169. The bill provides a total of \$46.85 billion to fully fund the Department of Veterans Affairs. Included in that amount is \$20.3 billion to fully fund Veterans health care, a \$1.3 billion increase over last year. In addition, the bill provides:

- \$321 million for Veterans Medical and Prosthetic Research, the same as the President's request.
- \$782 million for the Veterans Benefits Administration to expedite claims processing, an increase of \$73 million over last year.
- \$107 million to fully fund the National Cemetery Administration for current and new cemetery operations, an increase of \$10 million over last year.
- \$60 million for the Veterans State Extended Care Facilities, the same as the President's request.

The bill, as passed by the House, is largely in line with the President's Fiscal Year 2001 VA budget request.

As a member of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, I welcomed the Clinton Administration's proposed \$1.3 billion increase for VA health care in Fiscal Year 2001, but wondered why veterans had to wait so long to get its attention. The President's proposed increase was the first from the Administration since the 1996 budget, and only came after Congress provided an unprecedented \$1.7 billion or ten percent increase in VA funding last Fiscal Year.

Newsletters on the Net!

Would you like to receive future newsletters on Veterans' issues via email? If so, contact one of my offices listed below with your email address. I also provide newsletters regarding issues related to Gun Control, Social Security, Agriculture, Small Business and Education. Let my office know if you would like any of these as well.

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MARION VA FIELD HEARING

As a Member of the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, I feel strongly that we need to improve the quality of care for America's Veterans. Furthermore, acting on numerous complaints from many of you in the Fifth Congressional District regarding the quality of care that you are receiving from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), as well as staffing and safety issues at the Marion VA, I secured a commitment from the House Veterans' Affairs Committee to conduct a field hearing at the Marion VA campus. To that end, the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations conducted a field hearing on the quality of care and management issues at the Marion campus of Department of Veterans Affairs Northern Indiana Health System (NIHCS) on June 1, 2000. The hearing was in the campus theater and included several panels comprised of VA employees, veterans like yourselves, several Veterans Service Organizations, labor representatives and government representatives. Also attending the hearing was Representative Stump (R-AZ), Chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee. During the hearing, Chairman Stump and I committed to resolving the various issues regarding the Marion VA.

As part of these ongoing efforts, I and members of the professional staff of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee on Oversight and Investigation met with Ron Cowles, the Department of Veterans Affairs Deputy Assistant Secretary for Human Resources Management, and his staff. The meeting resulted in a strategic plan to address the numerous findings of the recent VA Inspector General Report regarding problems at the Marion VA Campus. As part of the plan, the VA agreed to work with the American Federation of Government Employees National Headquarters, as well as local union officials, VA Management and VA Network leadership, and local elected officials, to help resolve staffing and safety issues and general employer/employee relationships. The plan is to create a Partnership Council and to conduct mediation, review contracts, initiate a staffing and recruiting study, as well as review budget submission data used to allocate moneys through the Northern Indiana Health Care Network.

MILITARY RETIREE HEALTH CARE

Congress has worked very hard over the last several years to provide improved health care services to military retirees and their dependents. As such, Congress launched important pilot programs on the Federal Employee Health Benefit Plan (FEHBP) and on DoD/Medicare subvention. However, it is very evident that many military personnel and their families, as well as military retirees and their dependents, are still not receiving adequate and timely health care services.

As Chairman of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel, I have conducted extensive oversight on the Department of Defense Health Care Program, to include a hearing on military retiree health care. As part of this oversight plan, I conducted a field hearing at the Grissom Air Reserve Base on February 25, 2000, and another field hearing at Fort Bragg, North Carolina on February 28, 2000. In addition, the Subcommittee held a hearing in Washington, DC.

To that end, I included language in the Fiscal Year 2001 National Defense Authorization Act that directly and aggressively addresses military health care. The bill passed the House on May 18, 2000, by a vote of 353 to 63. The health care policy and funding initiatives contained in the bill result directly from what we heard during our field hearings and will remove a number of real barriers to an effective TRICARE system, as well as generate savings that can be redirected to pay for future benefits. Moreover, the health care proposals that I included go well beyond the reforms contained in President Clinton's Fiscal Year 2001 Budget request. The military health care provisions included in H.R. 4205 are:

- Elimination of co-payments for active duty family members enrolled in TRICARE Prime and the inclusion of family members in the TRICARE Prime Remote program.
- A new TRICARE Senior Pharmacy Program to give the same level of benefits for Medicare-eligible military retirees as is now available to other TRICARE beneficiaries through the mail order pharmacy program, as well as in-network and out-of-network retail pharmacies.
- Establishment of an independent oversight group to make recommendations to Congress on what a permanent military health care program for the Medicare-eligible should provide – with the goal of implementing that permanent benefit in 2004.
- Claims processing reform, which has the potential to save substantial money, with additional investment funding recommended to the Defense Health Program (DHP) to kick-start the reform effort.
- Required use of Internet-based systems to help improve claims processing, access to health care, and portability of benefits.
- Nearly \$135 million in additional funding to increase use of the military treatment facilities through the hiring of additional support staff, refurbishment of facilities, and procurement of technology and equipment.
- A requirement that the Secretary of Defense assess whether accrual funding of the DHP is required, and whether mandatory enrollment of beneficiaries should be required as a possible future step.



In addition, I included a provision that would have extended through 2003 the current Medicare-related demonstration programs. However, during consideration of the bill, an amendment was offered that made permanent the current Medicare-related demonstration program and expanded it from 11 to 35 sites, plus all military medical clinics nationwide. I opposed the amendment and offered to expand the program from 11 to 18 sites. The original amendment passed by a vote of 406 to 10. I support expanding and extending the program instead of making it permanent in order to ensure the program receives a fair and comprehensive test, and that solid data is available on which to base a plan for implementation in 2004.

MARINES TO LAND AT GRISSOM

On June 28 and 29, 2000, the House and Senate passed H.R. 4425, the Conference agreement to the Fiscal Year 2001 Military Construction Appropriations bill respectively. The measure includes \$4.73 million for the construction of a new Marine Corps Reserve Center and \$11.29 million for continuation of a Services Complex to house and feed drilling Reservists at Grissom.

On June 28, 1999, representatives from the 4th Marine Division visited Grissom Air Reserve Base looking for a possible location for a new training facility for Detachment 1, Communications Company, 4th Full Service Support Group. The Marine Corps initiated the visit after the Commanding General Marine Forces Reserve approached me at a meeting in New Orleans. During the discussion, I pledged to work with the Marine Corps Reserves to secure funding for a new reserve center, and requested that the project be included in this years appropriations bill.

Shortly after the visit, the Marine Corps selected one of three possible sites and is currently in the process of moving the unit from Fort Wayne to Grissom Air Reserve Base. The unit will use a temporary site outside of the cantonment area and will be co-located with the Civil Air Patrol. Although the Marine Corps programmed the new facility for Fiscal Year 2003, the Marine Corps listed this project as one of their "Unfunded Requirements," because the Detachment will be located outside the security of the base perimeter. As such, Congress agreed to fund the new facility in Fiscal Year 2001.



In addition, Congress agreed to appropriate \$11.29 million for Phase II of a three phase Services Complex at Grissom Air Reserve Base. Congress provided this funding because the current lodging facilities at Grissom Air Reserve Base are condemned and these facilities are located outside the base perimeter by about three-quarters of a mile. The Services Complex will consist of five facilities under one roof, and would contain a dining facility, a club (co-located with the dining facility), a community activities center, a dormitory, and a lodging facility. Ground breaking for Phase I of the Services Complex will occur later this year. I applaud my colleagues for fully funding these worthwhile projects, and appreciate Senators Lugar and Bayh for supporting my requests in the Senate. The measure was signed into law by the President on July 13, 2000.

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Official Business